

## **If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat.**

*13<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pentecost. Proper 14, Yr. A. August 10, 2008. (Text: Matt. 14:22-33)*

After the famous 5,000 uninvited guests had all been fed by his disciples' little snack-pack of five loaves and two fish, Jesus told his friends to climb back in their boat and go on back home alone, ahead of him. It was sundown, but he wanted to go off in the hills by himself and pray. He'd walk back home when he was ready.

During the night, a big storm came down on the lake and the disciples' boat was caught in it. The wind was blowing, waves were high, and the boat was taking on water. It looked ready to sink.

The pictorial symbol of the Church as a *boat* goes way back. And, though the little picture of a boat by itself can't convey it, we should remember that this boat is always full of terrified Christians in a storm. When Matthew wrote his gospel the Church already had problems: enemies on the outside and friction on the inside. Traditional Jews had expelled Christian Jews from their synagogues. Jewish Christians weren't sure how to treat gentile Christians. Gentile Christians weren't sure how to get along with their still-pagan families. And Peter and Paul had fallen out with each another. —So when you hear about another crisis in the Church, keep in mind that *this is nothing new*. There's never been a time when the Church was totally free from one crisis or another.

Just before dawn on the morning after he'd sent the boys back home in the boat, Jesus came walking out to them, through the wind and rain, over the stormy lake. The men in the boat saw him out there on the water as he approached them, but in the dim light and falling rain they thought they were seeing a ghost. After all, flesh-and-blood creatures can't walk on water, so this had to be an apparition, maybe something evil. They were already scared the boat might sink, so when they saw a figure heading toward them walking on the water they were terrified. Then the "ghost" spoke, and the voice sounded familiar: "*Have courage. It is I. Don't be afraid!*" It was Jesus. At least, he sounded like Jesus – but it was still hard to see clearly.

The main point for Christians as we hear this story again is that the Lord has promised to be with us forever. Forever. The Church —divided, weak and preoccupied with non-essentials as it now is— has been sent by Christ to do his work in the world. We're his chosen agents. In the time of our greatest need and most wrenching fear, when we're worn out either from "fighting the good fight" or fighting with each other, Jesus comes to us. So remember: this story isn't just about something that happened to the original Twelve disciples long ago, it's also the sign and promise of what Jesus will do for us when our boat is in danger. But, like the twelve scared men that stormy morning on Galilee, we don't necessarily always recognize Jesus when he shows up. Even when we hear his voice we can have doubts.

There's also a story-within-the-story here. The *big* story is that Jesus has committed his work to us. He has sent us out just as he sent the disciples out in their little boat. When we face storms and strife, Jesus promises to come to us. The story-within-the-story is about "Doubting Peter." (Everybody knows about "Doubting Thomas." This story is about "Doubting Peter.") Peter heard Jesus say, "*Have courage. It is I. Don't be afraid!*" But he was skeptical. He wasn't totally convinced it was really Jesus, fifty yards away across the water, calling out to them. So he decided on a test. He hollered back and said, "Lord, if it's *really* you, command me to come to you on the water."

Jesus gave him a one-word answer, "*Come!*"

Now, why do you suppose Peter figured *this* was the acid test for whether the mysterious figure really was Jesus or not? —Why this?— I think it was because Peter knew his Master had the habit of insisting that

his disciples do exactly what *he* was doing. He wanted them to imitate him. That's because Jesus expected his followers to *become like him*. (He still does!) That meant he assumed they'd take on missions that looked impossible —like feeding 5,000 people with five little loaves and two pieces of fish. Jesus had looked at the hungry crowd the day before and said to the disciples, “*You* give them something to eat.” So it might have seemed logical to Peter that Jesus would say, “OK. You see me doing it. Now you walk on water.” Peter knew something else, too: when Jesus told his disciples to do something, he always gave them the power to do it.

With this in mind, Peter climbed over the side of the boat and started to walk to Jesus. And, lo and behold, he was stepping on the water like it was dry land. I imagine he took one slow, tentative step at a time; he didn't break into a run. The water wasn't level, of course. Since the waves were high, Peter's stroll on the lake was up-and-down. But as long as he kept his eyes fixed on Jesus, he was fine: “Look at me, guys; I'm walking on the water!” After he was twenty or thirty yards from the boat —but still not all the way to Jesus—he must have looked down and thought about the two hundred feet of water directly underneath him. That's when he got scared. (Or, we should say, he got *more* scared.)

Something like that has happened to me before in airplanes. I'm scared of heights, but I usually manage well enough on a plane... unless I start looking out the window and thinking, “It's five miles down to the ground. Five miles!” —That's when I want to press the button and have the cabin attendant bring me a parachute.

Anyhow, I think Peter took his eyes off Jesus —maybe he looked over his shoulder at the other guys who were in the relative security of the boat— and then he began to sink. I picture this as happening with unnatural slowness. If I stepped out of a boat into a lake, I'd go down like a rock. But Peter went down s-l-o-w-l-y. And as he was going down, he yelled, “Lord, save me!” Suddenly Jesus was right there and pulled him up to safety, saying “*O, man of little faith, why did you doubt?*”

Peter made an attempt and failed. —Or did he? He got out of the boat and walked on the water *part* way to Jesus. That's not total failure; that's partial success! He almost made it to Jesus, and *then* he got scared and lost his nerve. Then he began to doubt. Peter had both faith and doubt. Jesus didn't call him a “man of no faith.” He called him a “man of little faith.” At a crucial moment, the doubt won out. Here's something true I read somewhere: “*Every time you take a step in faith you run the risk of failing. But if you're afraid of failure, you'll never step out in faith.*”

In principle, walking on water was like what all the disciples had done the previous day when they'd waded into the crowd and started breaking up the five little loaves and two hunks of fish that Jesus had prayed over, expecting to feed the whole mob with that little bit of food, just because Jesus had told them to do it. John Ortberg, whose great book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat* is one of my favorites, says the story about Peter walking on the water isn't just about risk-taking; it's about *obedience*. Christians have to learn how to tell the difference between what God is telling us to do and what just might be a prideful impulse on our part. Courage by itself is not enough. Courage has to be accompanied by wisdom.

I believe the Lord wants our little church here in Aspen to take some serious new steps in faith. I'm not sure what they are yet, but I feel certain that God will make his will clear before too long. *If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.* Being a Christian doesn't just mean going to church services on Sunday, week after week, and that's it. It means a life of authentic faith, obedience ...and risk. It means being willing to say, “Lord, tell us to come to you walking on the water.” The kind of faith that gets us out of the boat is the only kind that will keep Christ Episcopal Church sailing into the future.